

Rethinking water use

By Tami Reece, Master Gardener

I have read in the paper about the drought. How do I reduce the amount of water I use for my landscape without killing my plants? Courtney M. Templeton

Now is the perfect time to assess the water needs in your yard. Begin by prioritizing your existing plants. For some, lawn may fall in the low priority category while fruit trees may be a higher priority. Lawns, groundcovers, bedding plants, and shrubs can be reestablished over a relatively short period of time, while mature trees are not as easy to replace. Additionally, it is also perfectly acceptable to reduce the irrigation for established plants and trees. Moderately water-stressed fruit trees will not produce a full crop of fruit, but the tree will survive to fruit again.

The next step is to remove weeds; roots and all. Weeds compete aggressively and successfully with your desirable plants for soil moisture. By removing the weeds, you can be sure that any water that is available will be accessible to your high priority plants.

Next, mulch, mulch, mulch! Add a thick layer of mulch, 6 inches or more, to limit evaporation; i.e conserving water. Check the soil moisture level around your plants by simply digging through the layer of mulch or by inserting a ruler down into the mulch just as you would use a dipstick to check the oil in your car.

If you are considering any new plantings of trees or shrubs, remember that even native plants need regular watering the first year until they are established. If new planting are necessary, consider planting fewer than originally planned now and perhaps planting the rest in fall. Of the most common fruit and nut trees, almonds, figs and olives are the most tolerant of drought. Apples, apricots, cherries, pears, prunes, and walnuts are moderately tolerant with nectarines, peaches, and citrus being the least tolerant.

About 40 to 50 percent of a household's water use is used outdoors. As smart gardeners, we can have a meaningful impact on water conservation by reevaluating our landscape watering regimen. The Master Gardeners of San Luis Obispo County are committed to educating the public on water conservation methods. Find weekly tips on our blog at <http://ucanr.org/sites/mgslo/> or continue to read our weekly articles as we share water conservation tips for home gardeners.